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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 4328
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3149
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9906
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA PRIORITY 0236
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6836
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4699
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001443

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM MV

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: CROSS-PARTY COOPERATION YIELDS GENERALLY
POSITIVE RESULTS FOR REFORM

REF: A. COLOMBO 1410

¶B. COLOMBO 1132 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CDA JAMES MOORE FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Following a July 19 meeting between the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) and the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) in Colombo, facilitated by the British High Commissioner, the two sides upheld commitments to move the reform agenda forward. In exchange for the MDP's restraint on street activism and toning down of anti-government rhetoric, the GORM released a number of political prisoners, including an August 16 presidential pardon for high profile detainee Jennifer Latheef. Another meeting between the GORM and the MDP in Colombo on August 25 yielded a GORM commitment to free MDP chairperson Mohamed Nasheed on September 21 and drop charges of terrorism and sedition against him one month later. The GORM and MDP also agreed to begin formal collaboration on reform legislation following Nasheed's release and to form a police integrity commission with each side nominating members. Despite this atmosphere of cooperation, following an August 28 arrest in the southern city of Addu, anti-government protests broke out there and in the capital, Male'. The opposition complained of a heavy-handed police response, while GORM officials questioned whether Nasheed and some others in the MDP held a genuine commitment to peaceful change. Despite that setback, it appears that moderates on both sides of the aisle remain willing to work together to drive reforms forward. End summary.

GORM-MDP MEETINGS YIELD INITIAL POSITIVE RESULTS

¶2. (C) Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) officials and opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) representatives met in Colombo at the British High Commissioner's residence for a series of three informal talks from June-August 2006. While the Maldives press reported that discussions took place, the details of the agreements were not made public. In an August 24 briefing for diplomats, British poloff said that the first meeting established an initial mediated contact between the government and the opposition and laid the groundwork for further cooperation. The second meeting,

July 19, led to an MDP commitment to limit street protests and ensure that August 12, the anniversary of both the 2004 pro-democracy demonstrations and the 2005 arrest of MDP chairman Mohamed Nasheed, passed without major protests.

¶3. (C) In late July, the MDP did not hold any protests, and as a result, the GORM released MDP members previously arrested and detained in May for violating a presidential decree on freedom of assembly (ref B). The August 12 anniversary passed peacefully, with the MDP organizing a rally confined to one area of the capital. The GORM responded with the August 16 release of high profile detainee Jennifer Latheef, daughter of an MDP founder who had been sentenced to ten years in prison on terrorism charges (ref B). Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed phoned poloff on August 17 and noted that in addition to the GORM-MDP talks, Secretary Rice's letter to Shaheed had been instrumental in securing Latheef's release (ref A). Shaheed said he had shared the letter with President Gayoom and used it to argue against hard-liners in the cabinet who were loath to make concessions to the opposition.

¶4. (SBU) Latheef and four others had been sentenced for their participation in 2003 demonstrations in Male' that turned violent, with Latheef labeled the "mastermind" behind the riot. On August 17, a pro-opposition news website reported that Latheef "refused" her presidential pardon, choosing to remain in self-imposed house arrest until she is fully exonerated, and also demanding that the others sentenced along with her also be released. The government spokesman responded that Latheef's pardon

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stands, and asserted that prison is "not a resort into which she can check in and out!" Despite this public disagreement, GORM-MDP cooperation remained on track, and talks scheduled in Colombo August 25 went ahead as scheduled.

¶5. (C) On August 24, FM Shaheed, Attorney General (AG) Hassan Saeed, and a GORM parliamentarian, accompanied by the Maldivian High Commissioner and DCM in Colombo, called on the Charge' at the Embassy. Shaheed explained that the government delegation was in town for the August 25 talks, and noted that the July 19 talks had yielded positive results. He reiterated the value of Secretary Rice's letter in obtaining Jennifer Latheef's pardon, and expressed hope the US would continue to bolster the reform process in Maldives.

¶6. (C) The evening of August 25 FM Shaheed called poloff to offer a read-out of the discussions. He said the MDP again committed to limiting public demonstrations and to tone down anti-GORM rhetoric. September 19 marks the death anniversary of a prisoner in custody, whose 2003 killing led to a prison riot in which four other prisoners were shot, with riots ensuing across Male'. The MDP pledged to mark the anniversary peacefully, and in response, the government agreed to a September 21 release for MDP chairman Mohamed Nasheed, currently under house arrest and facing trial on terrorism and sedition charges. FM Shaheed said he expected "formalized" cooperation with the MDP on the legislative agenda following Nasheed's release. He added that if the MDP maintained its commitments following Nasheed's arrest, the charges against him would be dropped within a month after the release. FM Shaheed said that the GORM and MDP had also agreed to form a police integrity commission with members nominated by both sides.

CONTINUED COOPERATION BRIEFLY MARRED BY PROTEST

¶7. (U) On August 28, police attempted to arrest an activist in the southern town of Addu who had been involved in anti-government demonstrations and was implicated in an assault on two police officers that resulted in injuries to them. According to a statement from the government spokesman, the suspect resisted arrest, and the police had to subdue him, using pepper spray in the process. Two women in the vicinity went to the hospital for treatment following the arrest; one was released immediately with no injuries reported, and the other suffered minor eye irritation from the pepper spray. The opposition countered that the police had been heavy-handed and abusive during the arrest. A group of people had gathered to observe events, and an impromptu protest broke out in Addu, with the crowd demanding the government-appointed Atoll Chief explain events.

¶8. (U) According to press reports, rumors of events in Addu filtered to the capital, Male', and a group of senior MDP leaders went to the police station to make inquiries. A crowd soon formed around the police station, and police asked people to disperse. People left the immediate vicinity, but crowds gathered along side streets and police in riot gear came out to patrol the city. Citizens grew increasingly angry and occasionally violent, throwing bottles and rocks at security services. A group surrounded a government parliamentarian's house, and some threatened to break down his door, but police intervened and the mob dispersed without incident. Police made three arrests for disobedience to order during the demonstrations.

¶9. (C) In an August 29 telephone conversation with poloff, FM Shaheed, speaking from Male', expressed frustration at the turn of events. He said he had been in touch with MDP moderates throughout the day August 28, and they had expressed support for the security forces' actions. However, Shaheed posited, MDP chairman Nasheed and other "extremist elements" in the MDP supported violent street action. Shaheed was especially upset that

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MDP officials and members had publicly demanded the resignation of police commissioner Adam Zahir rather than nominating members to the proposed police integrity commission as outlined by the cross-party talks.

¶10. (C) Nasheed, also talking to poloff from Male' by phone August 29, said that the MDP's agreement was not with the whole government, but rather, only with the reformist ministers. He said the MDP did not blame Shaheed or his colleagues for security forces' perceived poor conduct, and he expressed hope that reformists across the aisle could continue to collaborate on reform. He was not confident, however, that he would actually be released in late September. On August 30, pro-opposition media reported that in an interview, Nasheed said MDP talks with government officials were designed to remove hard-liners from the cabinet and security services, and to install MDP members in their places in order to work with the reformists.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Comment: The talks in Colombo yielded positive results, with moderates on both sides committing to move forward on the reform agenda. This is especially important in light of the bargains made, because while the GORM continues to deny that prisoners are political, it uses them as leverage in negotiations. Ultimately, legislative cooperation should result in codified protection for citizens and sustainable systemic reform, ensuring that cases such as Latheef's are not repeated. While the GORM should be commended on efforts to date, we

should continue to urge further progress. As Shaheed's comments on Secretary Rice's letter indicate, the voice of the US carries a great deal of weight in this moderate Islamic, pro-Western country.

¶12. (C) Comment cont'd: The August 28 demonstration seemed to be a spontaneous response to the rapidly changing political environment. With the outcome of the MDP-GORM talks guarded from the public at large, it may be difficult for the MDP to reign in activists. In addition, Nasheed's deeply unhelpful public interview, skewing the actual results, will surely create problems for reformist GORM officials. Nevertheless, there appears to be enough communication between moderates to ensure that the reform process continues to trudge forward, although not always smoothly.

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